

PETER J. KATZ

SOCIETY MUST BE SELF- DEFENDED: VIOLENCE, WILFUL IGNORANCE, AND THE EMBODIED HABITS OF FASCISM

ABSTRACT

In the context of authoritarian nationalism, the ideology of self-defence supports and is supported by the imagined divide between civil society and the dangerous Other. Inflated ideas about martial arts, male aggression, and the legitimacy of self-defence obscure the structural violence that maintains power through strategic ignorance. But this also creates a paradox: civil society, opposed to animal violence, must deploy that very violence against the barbarian—who, by definition, is better at it. To survive, society and self-defence become fascist. This essay examines the historical and contemporary European and American contexts of this kind of self-defence discourse. It then links these discourses to the body by exploring the transformation of Shōtōkan karate as a physical cultivation of the fascist body under the Shōwa empire. Nationalist, authoritarian self-defence is not merely ideological but deeply embodied, and cultivates subjects whose bodies and beliefs are trained to forget, dominate, and conform.

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Recently (i.e., early 2025), the internet has wondered who would win in a fight: one gorilla, or one-hundred men. Ostensibly, 60% of Americans think they could win a fight against a sizable dog (6% also believe they could fight a bear). While fighting bears and gorillas seems ridiculous, it is indicative of part of a more mainstream milieu of overinflated assumptions about self-defence and violence. The YouTube show *Ultimate Self-Defense Champion*—hosted by a former Aikido practitioner who built his content brand around the realisation that Aikido would not work ‘in the street’—tests martial arts influencers in ‘self-defence’ scenarios. One of those influencers, *Hard2Hurt*, touts his experience as a police officer who trained police officers and regularly reviews self-defence tools for their viability on the street. Any given martial arts training facility has a high probability of referring to self-defence as an end goal of the instruction they offer. ‘Efficacy’ claims to convert training from the gym to the cage to the street.

This paper combines the ordinary language philosophy of Wittgenstein, Foucauldian analysis of power, and phenomenology to frame self-defence as a technology of embodiment and affect. I aim to further develop affect theory, particularly its political component, by attending to the way that the idea of street-effective self-defence often disciplines bodies into fascist habits that prop up neoliberal masculinity, nationalist racism and classism, and an aestheticisation and fetishisation of violence. Continental philosophy (affect) unites with analytic philosophy to think about how those bodily habits direct our *attention* (in analytic terms) to the world; we come to see others as dangerous; a self as needing defending; particular bodies as threats and targets of violence.

To make this argument, I will first discuss Alex Channon and Christopher Matthews’s conceptualisation of violence to clarify the distinction between what most of us do in our practice of martial arts and self-defence, with particular emphasis on a strain of nationalist, masculinist self-defence discourse that produces dangerous forms of attention. Then, I will look back to Hobbes through Foucault’s ‘Society Must Be Defended’ lectures to argue that the founding myth of self-defence violence introduces a what I will call the self-defence paradox: the man who, to defeat the animalistic barbarian at the gates, must rely on the very animality that society ostensibly civilises. This paradox purportedly ‘resolves’, though it does not really resolve at all, through forgetting: forgetting the extremity and implausibility of physical violence as choreographed in martial arts self-defence practice, forgetting the State’s monopoly on violence, and forgetting that paradoxical relationship between barbaric violence and the alleged defence of civilisation. Society must indeed be self-defended—that is, defended against itself.

The self-defence paradox produces an internalized fascism, what Deleuze and Guattari call a ‘micropolitics’ that drives the State as a ‘war machine that no longer had anything but war as its object, and would rather annihilate its own servants than stop the destruction’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/2009, p. 231). In the

second half of this paper, I turn to what Martial Arts Studies can offer as a development on the philosophy of affect and ideology—and potentially novel modes of critique those developments could enable. Drawing on the work of Lauren Miller in martial arts studies and Donovan O. Schaefer in affect theory, I suggest that martial arts studies can illuminate the way that bodies know about and are cultivated into these fascist self-destruction machines. The fascist origins of Shōtōkan karate-dō demonstrate how martial arts—or any embodied practice—cultivate the habits and affects of fascism in the body. Through analysis of the stances and movements of Shōtōkan karate-dō in comparison with their origins, I posit that fascism can use embodied practice to creep into affective habits, and that self-defence is a particularly fraught intersection of those flows of power. Finally, I challenge martial arts studies to think about our own wilful ignorance about the origins and politics of many of our arts, and to consider how we can rescue those practices from their internalized fascism while also fighting the everyday fascism too common in current global politics.

VIOLENCE: RITUAL, CONSENT, VIOLATION

The analytic problem at the heart of the self-defence paradox is a misconstrual of the concept of *violence*. This section draws on Channon and Matthews’s valuable disambiguation of violence to outline how we might understand different modalities of violence. These distinctions are crucial to clarify that self-defence and violence are not necessarily synonymous—and that martial arts practice need not necessarily entail either.

As Channon and Matthews’s work on violence demonstrates, academics and fighters alike often force the word into ill-fitting conceptual forms. Now, they are careful to clarify that there is ‘no single definition ... either desirable or possible’; rather, they posit, ‘we should attempt to find conceptions that are adequately theorised relative to the important contributions of either position’ (Matthews and Channon, 2017, p. 753). This is the sticky part of the concept: in ordinary language, we would consider a punch *qua* punch ‘violent’—but in the gym or *dōjō*, a punch can be consensual, appropriate or fitting, or even inappropriately uncommitted to contact. If I punch a patient in the face when I see them for an ethics consult, that is a form of nonconsensual, instigative, interpersonal violence (734). On the other hand, if I punch my training partner in the face during a kickboxing spar, it is a form of *ritualised violence*: ‘staged, managed,’ deemed fitting within ‘context-specific formal or informal norms,’ and an interaction to which we have both consented (Matthews, 2014, 2016).

That consent is complex and varied, from the explicit ‘let’s just have a flow round’ to the subtle communication of a pair of experienced training partners’ stances, fakes, and jabs that communicate whether this will be a hard spar or a technical practice (Channon and Matthews, 2022). Even within consensual, ritualised violence, however, there are degrees and kinds of

violence. Invested in divorcing fighting and violence (Matthews and Channon, 2016 and ongoing), Matthews and Channon emphasise the importance of violence-as-violation: that the modes of violence to which the victim has not consented are the most explicitly violent (Matthews and Channon, 2017, p. 765). To enrich the concept of violence, they point us toward Dunning's typology of violence as being comprised of a set of dynamic elements along a series of gradients: 'ritual/non-ritual, legitimate/illegitimate, armed/unarmed, physical/psychological, intentional/accidental, instigative/reactive, and instrumental/expressive' (Matthews and Channon 2017, p. 757). We can mobilise this to understand that while practising *kihōn* (basic moves) in a *dōjō* or live rolling at a top MMA gym may contain elements that might in plain language be associated with violence, there is a categorical distinction between the consensual, ritualised violence of sparring and nonconsensual, violating, instigative violence that begins a self-defence encounter and the equally nonconsensual, reactive violence entailed in that defence.

Channon and Matthews's valuable conceptual engineering aims to deepen and, in some ways, change the ways that academics use the term 'violence' to refer to a network of differing concepts. My project here, however, aims toward conceptual analysis rather than engineering. As Wittgenstein admonishes: 'When philosophers use a word... and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used this way in the language in which it is at home?' (2009 [1953], p. 116). The aim of philosophy, at least Wittgensteinian philosophy, is 'to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (116). In the case of violence, this looks something like accepting at face-value the ordinary language use of 'violent' to cover a consensual punch and a back-alley mugging. This blanket use of the term explains at a surface level why everyone from Joe Rogan to the seventy-year-old Shōtōkan black belt in my *dōjō* to the former high school wrestler on the trial class at my Brazilian jiu-jitsu gym thinks that they are capable of the violence of self-defence. But knowing *that* they use the same word for different things does little to tell us *why* they do. The easy answer, of course, is that they are just plain wrong. But that's neither interesting nor, I think, accurate to the extent that this ignorance is motivated from *somewhere*. Popular discourses around self-defence could at some point have corrected this mistake, but I will argue that the conflation of 'violence' with the defence of the self, martial practice, sport and consensual fighting, and animality all support the modern *dispositif* that upholds the State, or the:

thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. (Foucault, 1980, p. 194)

This description is obviously sweeping, but I will offer a few examples that can help illustrate and specify what exactly these discourses look like.

The European adoption and adaptation of East Asian martial arts for the purposes of 'self-defence' traces at least some of its origins in a nationalist, classist, racist project. In a London that *fin-de-siècle* men perceived as under attack from Irish immigrants and working-class hooligans (Anon., 1854, p. 387; Morrison 1892), highly delineated self-defence scenarios affirmed "both the power and masculinity of the bourgeois man" by 'transform[ing] the uncontrollable suburban and urban streets into vigilantly choreographed theater' (Katz, 2016, p. 344). Systematic practice, I argued in my analysis of Bartitsu, aimed to classify and control "all bodies and objects at all times", so that even an overcoat became an instrument to defend bourgeois women from the threat of assailants (Katz, 2016, p. 358); the man who practices self-defence must be ever-vigilant, for he and his family are 'never really secure from attack at any moment of our lives', another *fin-de-siècle* self-defence manual warns (Headley and Phillips-Wolley, 1890, p. 111). There are some key concepts embedded in the emergence of Bartitsu which, when combined with the rise of neoliberalism and fascism in the twentieth century, produce a citizen dedicated to the protection of the self and the State from incursion by the working-class, immigrant barbarian: the virtue of martial practice as a systematic way to control the dangerous Other; the need for men to protect the middle class and the family; and the absolute danger of 'the street.'

This essay attends narrowly to these kinds of questions as they pertain to the State (often through class and race), but as Paul Bowman's article in this issue (Bowman, 2025) rightly points out, these elements are inextricably bound up with masculinity; I defer to his argument and the way that he foregrounds questions of gender. Here, I consider how these ideologies manifest at the level of affect by focussing nonconscious (as opposed to the psychoanalytic-laden 'unconscious') attention that primes bodies for violence against those that the *dispositif* of the State (broadly conceived) designates as barbarian Others. In an article on empathy and martial arts, I extended my claim that Bartitsu prepared the bourgeois man's body to do violence at all times to argue that martial arts practice offers a distinctly powerful means to cultivate particular kinds of *attention* (Katz, 2024, pp. 77–80). In analytic philosophy, *attention* refers to the directedness of our mental processes; George Berkeley gives the example of how we can see a triangular shape and recognize it as a triangle without attending to the precise nature of its angles and the relationship of the sides (Berkeley, 1710, pp. 16–20). We can imagine that some people (e.g., engineers, artists, mathematicians) might be more inclined to attend to those angles. In other words, as you step in to punch me, I perceive much irrelevant information like the colour of your outfit or the style of your hair, so my mind must attend to those details it finds most *salient*. A novice might focus on their opponent's hand; a more skilled practitioner might attend to shoulders or hips; a more skilled practitioner still will have the illusion that they do not focus on anything in particular when in fact they have simply become accustomed to attending to more details and their relations. Most crucially, as someone who

subscribes to the motor theory of attention, I would argue that the kinds of things we attend to involve *preparation for motor action*.

To put that all together with affect: martial arts podcaster Joe Rogan decries martial arts that claim to teach self-defence but say nothing about ‘threat analysis’ (Rogan, 2014). And this idea of *threat analysis* is a theory of attention: that there are certain details to which self-defence practitioners should attend, certain details they should prime their bodies to act *against*. If I am correct that ‘our bodies respond to other bodies before conscious choice appears to have caught up’ and that martial arts are the ‘cultivation of affective habit through bodily practice’ (Katz, 2024, pp. 78, 80), then threat analysis is the cultivation of a particular kind of reflexive orientation toward other bodies. When threat analysis intersects with the protection of sovereignty—of the self and the State—it pulls in with it self- and other-destructive dispositions embedded in isolationist and exclusionary ideologies like racism and nationalism, in short, the cultivation of a fascist body.

To be clear, not all kinds of self-defence are necessarily fascist, but where self-defence intersects with the defence of the State, nationalist ideology takes over. As Elsa Dorlin argues, the right to self-defence has been integral in liberatory, revolutionary movements—including Bartitsu’s role in the suffragette movement (Dorlin, 2017/2022, pp. 30-32, 44). Yet even here, the acquisition of the political right to self-defence has been bound up in the protection of the nation: ‘not having the duty of defending your country means not having the ability to defend *yourself*, she writes of the French Revolution, because of the State’s ‘social management of martiality’ that partitions its people into passive citizens and active soldiers (p. 31). To enter into civilisation requires the right to violence.

The citizen soldier has always been an important myth in the United States, from the National Rifle Association’s adoption of the ‘Don’t tread on me’ slogan from the Revolutionary War, to the proliferation of ‘thin blue line’ bumper stickers and flags that align citizens with the police force—that distinctly military wing of the *polis*. The emblem of the comic book antihero and former US Marine, The Punisher, has been adopted by the American right wing, often in a stars-and-stripes motif. Ultimately, this practice of self-protection through protecting the State transforms certain bodies into dangerous Others that are the proper subject of self-defence’s violence. When the citizen soldier fights to defend himself and often his family, it is often against a foreign threat within the nation; the premiere issue of *The Punisher’s* unlimited series depicts a very white Punisher pointing a bazooka into a room of brown men (Baron, 1987). From the *fin-de-siecle* London streets to the War on Drugs to Jack Reacher, civilisation depends on men (again, see Bowman, 2025) who can defend themselves and the State against the barbarian Other at the gates.

Except, as the next section will demonstrate, this dependence is a paradox: the sovereign neo-liberal self is directly opposed to the State yet must defend the state; men must be civilized, but must be civilized through violence against the animalistic barbarian—who is, in fact, better at violence.

WAR: MYTH, CIVILISATION, BARBARIANS

In an oft-repeated talking point about self-defence, Joe Rogan says, ‘My thinking is always, “learn what works against trained killers”’ (Rogan, 2014). Efficacy reigns supreme. And yet, there is also a self-improvement component, one particularly directed at young men: martial arts, he says repeatedly in interviews, ‘are a vehicle for developing your human potential’.

More paradoxical still, when Amanda Knox asked him ‘Could I actually learn to defend myself against someone like you?’, Rogan insists: No (Rogan, 2025). She flounders, repeating his words about learning to fight against trained killers. But no, he repeats: ‘That’s reality. That’s physics’. The violence of self-defence is brutal and, fundamentally, animal. Rogan follows up Knox’s question with a reference to the 100 men vs. a gorilla meme, saying, ‘They don’t even know what an animal is. They have no idea. People know what their dog is. They have no idea what an animal is, an actual real animal’. This seems deeply paradoxical: real self-defence should work against trained killers, but will not work against trained killers; it should be civilising, but does not know the power of ‘an actual real animal’. This is the fascist self-defence paradox *par excellence*: that the man of self-defence must forget his own claims to make sense of his own claims.

This section explores the Hobbesian myth of the State as a direct antagonist against the individual. This produces the paradox that civilization exists in tension with the civilized man who must, against their will, defend civilization against the animal violence that threatens it—but those who threaten it are, by definition, more powerful, more animal individuals. ‘Myth’ here has both a sociological sense as in meaning-making story, and also a colloquial sense in that this is hardly an accurate story of why communities exist. At the same time, the myth is especially prominent in Anglo-American political discourses and imaginations, and may have so bled into the beliefs of those imperial powers that the myth has infected a lot more than just Britain and the US.

The myth: Arch-cynic Thomas Hobbes begins his discourse on government with the declaration:

Nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there bee found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind then another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himselfe any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. (1651, p. 13)

In other words, while we are acutely aware of the benefits of size, strength, or speed in the octagon, those differences are more or less minimized in the context of warfare with weapons, or allies, or compared to a gorilla. And from this ‘equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in attaining of our Ends’—chiefly, the ‘preservation of [our] own ... Life,’ even and especially at the cost

of someone else's. Given the relative equality of all, and the relative risk of violence from any one person, people enter into society by dint of self-preservation (Hobbes, 1651). In short, the State emerges only in desperate response to *The War* behind all society, behind every individual: the war of 'every man against every man.' Only the State quells the diffidence between equals, the lack of trust that breeds a habit of perpetual readiness for war. This is the core myth of the Hobbesian state: that we exist in constant strife with one another, and that the State merely collects and directs that violence.

The inescapable power of this myth is that it continues even and especially when violence is not explicit. As Foucault argues, violence 'goes on even when the State has been constituted,' for 'a man who wishes to avoid war can do so only on one condition: he must show that he is ready to wage war, and is not prepared to abandon all thought of war' (Foucault, 1997/2003, p. 90, 92–93). In this sense, the civilised man must always be on the verge of war, but restrained; 'Hold me back, bro,' he says to the State. If we embrace this myth (which we need not and should not) there is a dark sense in which the play of fighting is mimetic to the kind of ongoing warfare of the State, built around tenuous consent and an agreement that we will all play the game of edging toward the brink without crossing over. This undercurrent of violence as part of civilization enables the contemporary *bushidō* discourse around martial-arts-as-self-defence practice: the paradox that one trains to be a peaceful warrior ready to unleash violence if need be.

The myth dictates that this violence must always be ready to be unleashed against the barbarian at the gate. To distinguish between ostensible threats—and to be clear, the intentionally inflammatory language in Foucault describes how the myth of perpetual war frames people; it does not purport that any people actually deserve these titles—Foucault proposes a distinction between the 'savage' and the 'barbarian.' The 'savage ... lives in a state of savagery together with other savages,' and 'once he enters a relation of a social kind ... ceases to be a savage' (Foucault, 1997/2003, p. 194). This describes the myriad indigenous people whom imperialism absorbed and assimilated (violently) into the imperial society, and who then ceased to be coded as savages or were at least 'noble savages'—the Indian governors of colonized African peoples, themselves colonized by the British. The waves of xenophobic nationalism that have swept through many nations in the last decade are *not* directed at 'savage' peoples, who can be adopted into social relations.

They are instead directed at the 'barbarian,' who cannot exist without 'the history of the civilization he sets ablaze' (Foucault, 1997/2003, p. 195), without the civilization that he aims to destroy. Barbarians emerge not out of 'some natural backdrop to which he belongs,' but from opposition to civilization itself. And so, when the threat of violence 'wells up in the State's interstices, at its limits and on its frontiers,' it is not from savages but from barbarians (Foucault, 1980/2003, p. 90, 195). I refuse to name examples here so as not to reiterate current ideological and real violence, but it should be unfortunately easy to conjure up

examples of discourses about people whose immigration is tantamount to invasion, whose cultural differences are encoded as a dangerous refusal to assimilate, whose very presence in an ostensibly civilized country threatens to destabilize it.

The paradox here is that in the Hobbesian myth, unbeknownst to the Hobbesian myth, the barbarian is the 'civilised man' as fascism renders him. The barbarian is always ready to wage war against constraints that he believes he does not need, unwilling to give up his freedom in return for security because—and this is the crux of it—because he embraces the fascist myth that the underpinning of the State is a constant state of War. And the fact of the matter is that the State often cannot protect the frontiers from the barbarian. Enter Batman, or John Wayne, or Barton-Wright: the barbarian who gives up no freedom for security, because he is his own security, who knows that the best defence is self-defence. The violence embedded in the Hobbesian myth of the State generates a paradox: the barbarian simply turns up that violence better than the civilised man.

IGNORANCE: KNOWLEDGE, OVERDETERMINATION, POWER

The language of violence and animality intertwine around self-defence. Those same men, presumably, who want to protect themselves and their very heterosexual nuclear families from criminals talk about having 'that dawg' in them that makes them just see red and win fights. Society is the antithesis of animal violence, but animal violence is frightening and dangerous—and efficacious and also part of the State. How, then, can society protect itself against the incursion of the animalistic (racialised, classed) Other and their violent nature when it turns out that animal violence is part of the civilised man—and the barbarian is better at it? The non-answer of self-defence discourse seems to me to be: ignore those paradoxes entirely. The epistemological question here is the production of this knowledge, which comes by fiat through frantic, hyper-vigilant insistence on knowledge about and classification of the bodies involved: in a word, *overdetermining* them. This kind of knowledge aims to stave off threats by claiming to understand them completely, and by mobilizing that understanding to structure spaces and bodies so that the dangerous Other can be properly contained and eliminated.

Knowledge is crucial to discourses of self-defence. In my work on Barton-Wright and Bartitsu, I suggested that turn-of-the-20th-century self-defence manuals mobilised discourses of science and 'systems' to 'stage, define, and thereby control the unruly theatre of the street' (Katz, 2015, p. 344). Even if the actual images and manuals shared very little resemblance to actual London life, self-defence manuals 'choreograph[ed] an affirmation of both the power and masculinity of the bourgeois man' against the *fin-de-siecle* barbarians (p. 344): hooligans, the poor, the Irish. Scientifcity—deploying the rhetoric of science in an appeal to the authority of science—overdetermined the potential actions of the hooligan to make them controllable: they *will* attack thus, and you

will respond thus, which will force them to respond in this way, etc. The rhetorical power of science makes these projections into determinations and *overdeterminations* of those dangerous bodies.¹

While there is a degree of naivete that may be involved in these martial predictions, more deeply, I would argue, these schemas cultivate an *epistemology of ignorance*. This concept comes from the work of Charles Mills on *white* ignorance about Black people's pain. Mills writes that concepts or the lack of concepts of Black people's pain experiences 'driv[es] the perception, with whites intent on denying what is before them' (Mills, 2007, p. 27). Elizabeth Spelman (2007), in her reading of James Baldwin, emphasises the necessity that in white ignorance, it is not enough that *S* not believe *p* is true or false; *S* must also not *want to believe* that *p* is true or false. So, *S* avoids thinking about *p* as much as possible (Medina, 2012, p. 34).² In this case, it is not enough to avoid thinking about the potential untranslatability of self-defence practice into nonconsensual violence; self-defence practitioners do not want to *believe* that the gym does not translate to the street.

There may appear to be an improbable degree of intent in the way that I have described ignorance here. Firstly, this is somewhat an artifact of how we use language; as Medina reminds us, closed-mindedness largely emerges from nonconscious 'socialization that leads one to be insensitive to certain things and immune to certain considerations' (2012, p. 34). But in the case of fascism, the affect of closed-mindedness is at least deliberately *cultivated* through disavowal. There is probably no moment at which a citizen thinks 'and now I will ignore this,' or where someone in power thinks 'and now I will teach them to ignore this,' but there is likely a deliberate endeavour to prime people to ignore what they are told to ignore. Active ignorance, as Medina calls it, is an active paradox (2012, 18, 39).

White ignorance is not only metaphorically or conceptually useful to think about self-defence; the self-defence paradox is, I argue, part of the same *dispositif* of State racism and violence, and of ignorance/knowledge that produces white ignorance. In the case of white ignorance what seems like an absence of epistemic resources may result from *surplus* epistemic resources, or an overdetermination of meaning-making that Shannon Sullivan calls 'ignorance/knowledge' (Sullivan, 2007, p. 154; see Jenkins, 2018). Ignorance may be an illusion produced by dominant groups to maintain that dominance; what looks like a gap is an overdetermination of knowledge about another group that overrides perception and logic with its own 'unchallengeable premises' which 'lead to judgments for which there is insufficient evidence' (Alcoff, 2007, p. 48). In terms of race, this looks like

overdetermined knowledge about how Black people's bodies work, for example, at the expense of actually attending to their experience. In the case of self-defence, the overdetermination of the street and the ability of the civilised man to release his inner barbarian allows *S* not to think about *p*—and why would they? for they already *know*.

Ignorance/knowledge insists too much on its own coherence: in its desperation to overdetermine knowledge, it depends on premises untenable by its own epistemological standards. To reinforce racial power, in Charles Mills's words, white ignorance 'produc[es] the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made' (Mills 1997, p. 18). Ignorance, whether from a lack of knowledge or an intentional forgetting or unlearning, 'is actively produced for purposes of domination and exploitation' (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, p. 1; Alcoff 2007, p. 48). In short, 'ignorance' does not entail 'accidental'; and ignorance about the necessity and inevitability of self-defence supports the founding myth of the State in perpetual war.

To put it explicitly, the myth of the State in perpetual war requires that:

1. Civilised man must give up animal violence to enter into society
2. But at the same time, the position of perpetual war requires that the civilised man be ready at any time to return to animal violence
3. By definition, the barbarian retains animal violence (via 1), and deploys it against society
4. Civilised man must defend society against the animal violence of the barbarian
5. But to defend society against the barbarian, civilised man must deploy animal violence (contra 1)
6. But the barbarian is, by definition, closer to that animal violence (via 3)
7. And so, the science of self-defence emerges to draw violence into the purview of the State and scientific society—
8. —but the discourse of nationalist/masculinist self-defence is always aware and unaware (disavowing) the ignorance that makes the discourse of self-defence possible

The tangle of the self-defence paradox suggests that self-defence is an ideology that has run away with itself. While it is directed at the 'barbarian,' a palimpsest on which white masculinity can write the dangerous flavour of the era against which society must be

¹ Of course, there is the physical reality that if trained person A responds to an attack from person B in such a way that they check or block limbs and angles, they can limit the potential ways that person B can move. But that tells us nothing about the translation of ritual consensual violence into the messiness of instigative, nonconsensual violence. Even less so, the psychological translation of the will to participate in that different kind of violence (I cannot help but roll my eyes as I watch a room full of professionals, teenagers, and retirees practice beating imaginary assailants to death). Again, we could claim that this is just an oversight, but as this section argues, the 'just' here is an intentional oversight.

² As Dotson argues, the epistemic violence that emerges from this distortion 'occurs when an audience fails to communicatively reciprocate—or fails to recognize how an utterance was meant to be taken—in a linguistics exchange due to (pernicious) ignorance' (Dotson 2011, 4).

defended, it remains unclear exactly for whom the discourse of self-defence is actually *working*. The answer, I suggest, is: nobody. Instead, it is a paradox born of the myth of the State in perpetual war, an epiphenomenon that traps its practitioners as much as (or more?) as it produces violence against the ostensible barbarian—because again, the self-defence practitioner turns out to be just a less effective barbarian unless they go fully animal. As Foucault reminds us regularly, '[T]ruth isn't outside power, or lacking in power'; it is 'produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint' (Foucault, 1980/2003, p. 131). This is why I advocate for a project of conceptual analysis as much as conceptual engineering; rather than try to separate truth from power, we might instead excavate the ways that our language is embedded within hegemonic relays of power. I take for granted that we (broadly construed) should be invested in critiquing and resisting fascism. And as the next section will argue, this extends well beyond our language to our bodies and affects—and martial arts studies is particularly well-suited to understand, critique, and perhaps even resist the ways that fascism is enculturated into our bodies.

VIOLENCE/REPOSE: SHŌTŌKAN KARATE-DŌ AND THE AESTHETICS OF FASCISM

To better understand how the myth self-defence intertwines with fascism in embodiment, this section begins with a brief discussion of fascism and fascist aesthetics, considers a history of Shōtōkan's fascist origins, and then turns to an investigation of particular stances and movements to get at the deeply embedded, embodied practices of fascism within karate. Martial arts studies, I have argued elsewhere, can think about embodied knowledge in ways that get more directly at the nonconscious ways we prime our bodies to respond to other bodies. In that work, I was optimistic about martial arts practice and empathy; I retain that optimism, but this piece is also invested in explicating the insidious ways that fascism can also creep into the nonconscious priming of our bodily habits.

The cultural history of Shōtōkan karate-dō is inextricably connected to the Meiji Restoration and the rise of fascism in early 20th-century Shōwa Japan. Funakoshi Gichin, the founder of Shōtōkan, was born in 1868 in Ryukyu (Okinawa), and trained under Anko Itosu and Anko Azato—but what we call the style he learned from them is part of the explicitly nationalist project behind karate. In a letter to the Secretary of Education, Anko Itosu referred to his style as 'Tang Te,' or 'Chinese Hand.' As the Ryukyu styles began to make their way into Japan, the idea that the martial art was 'Chinese' could not stand, and so they were renamed based on their regions; Anko's style became 'Shuri-te' after the Shuri prefecture where he lived. And when Funakoshi brought the style to mainland Japan in 1936, he changed the characters to *karate* or 'Empty Hand'; 'Shoto-kan' literally means 'House of Shoto,' Funakoshi's penname. So, even the name and how we refer to

Shōtōkan and its antecedents indicates a particular point along the nationalist endeavour.

Along the way to Shōtōkan, we can see the introduction of explicitly fascist aesthetics. Most of these are well-researched or even self-evident, but they give us a useful jumping-off point. Perhaps the most obvious are the hierarchies of belts introduced to Judo by Kano Jigoro, the veneration of founders and teachers with images at the *shōmen* or front of the *dōjō*, and the emphasis on *bushidō* or a resurrected samurai spirit. These are useful because there are clear, other explanations for these elements: belt ranks, derived from *Gō* rankings, help teachers distinguish between beginning and advanced students at-a-glance while teaching, and give external motivation to students; the veneration of founders and ancestors makes some sense in the religious contexts of Shinto and Buddhism, though the veneration of ancestors and the emperor as a core part of Japanese culture is also arguably part of the Meiji Restoration's revision of history and Buddhism. These examples, rank belts in particular, set up a framework that I will call back to in the later analysis of embodied practice: elements that have on the one hand a seemingly obvious and innocuous cause, and that are at the same time, collectively part of or co-opted by a fascist project.

Bushidō offers a clear example of something that seems reasonable—we are talking about *martial* arts, so some connection to martial culture makes sense. However, Inazo Nitobe's *bushidō: The Soul of Japan* brought bushidō into cultural prominence, and it was published in 1899; even more importantly, it was published in English a year later as an extension of soft power to make a case for Meiji Japan's entry onto the world stage through *nihonjinron*, or the 'purported uniqueness of the Japanese,' as Sharf argues (1993, p. 6). Bushidō, broadly understood, was cultivated through martial arts (wrestling, archery, swordsmanship, etc.) at the Dai Nippon Butokukai, headed by Kano Jigoro, the founder of judo. And even the names of these martial arts reflected an ideological project, as Nishikubo Hiromichi transformed these arts from *jutsu* or techniques to *dō* or ways, to 'sho[w] that martial arts taught service to the emperor, not technical skill' (Bodiford, 2010, p. 387). Abe, Kiyohara, and Nakajima (1992) offer a thorough and complex history of how school gymnastics in Japan gradually became increasingly militarized throughout the early twentieth century.

Any one of these elements by itself is not necessarily fascist, though we should definitely consider that all martial arts will be to some degree militaristic and bring with them the associated problematics of violence and depersonalization. But, as Anko Itosu's letters and Funakoshi's writings show, they saw this as part of an educational and shaping project. Anko wrote in a 1908 letter that if children begin to practice Tang-te when they are young, that they would be 'well-suited for military service.' Funakoshi writes in his *Karate-dō Ichi-ro* (1956) that the ultimate aim of karate is 'perfection of character' And these two together articulate how Shōtōkan cultivates the fascist habitus: aesthetics. Karate is beautiful and aesthetic, and deliberately so. Militaristic perfection is literally embodied in the incessant practice of

physical refinement and conformity; a karate class will likely spend most of its time repeating the same movement, aiming for every muscle and motion to be exactly, precisely the same in every execution, across every body. Bodily differences are made to submit; there is a *right* way to perform this strike in the kata, and it is *always* this way. Unlike the more obviously violent, arguably fascist overtones in some contemporary practices—demonstrated in Swen Koerner and Mario Staller's (2023) research on Krav Maga—Shōtōkan seems almost the opposite: contemplative and aesthetic. And this is what makes it distinctly Shōwa fascist.

Early-20th-century Shōwa fascism depended on the cultivation of an aesthetic of violence—both killing and suicide, as the suicide-machine of the State of Perpetual War demands. In her essay on fascist aesthetics of Nazi film, Susan Sontag (1975) writes: 'Fascist aesthetics ... flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behaviour, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain; they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude.' The merging of what Tansman describes as 'destruction and creation, self-sacrifice, and self-aggrandizement' is true of Shōwa fascism as well, often imagined through death (2009, p. 54). While Nazi imagery fetishized death through powerful Teutonic warriors—for example, the SS death's-head crest—Shōwa fascism fetishized death through imagery of the lone soldier who dies on the battlefield for the Emperor, to be mourned by his family at home. Isoda Koichi calls this *ansoku jōtai*, or a 'state of repose,' an aesthetic unique to Japanese fascism. In his *Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism*, Tansman describes *ansoku jōtai* as 'a calm, cocooning respite from modern life—but a cocoon that would eventually bear new and unanticipated forms of agitation' (2009, p. 10). Fascism here explicitly deploys biopower to entangle one's death with the rebirth of the state to produce what Foucault calls 'an absolutely racist state, an absolutely murderous state, and an absolutely suicidal state' (Foucault, 1997/2003, p. 260). In Shōwa fascism, death and violence become beautiful, submission and stillness are wrapped up in power and destruction.

I begin with aesthetics because it is a mistake to construe fascism (or any politics) as simply a set of violent ideologies. Critically, as philosophers like Donovan Schaefer have argued, the basis for belief begins with 'the way things feel ... clustered material forms, aspects of our embodied life' and how our bodies encounter other bodies. A thorough overview of the work on affect far exceeds the scope of this paper, but martial arts studies has already made good use of these ideas.³ Lauren Miller's work, particularly her recent *Graceful Resistance*, makes a compelling case for the way that bodily practices shape one's 'affective habitus,' or the 'underlying emotional orientation toward the world that one acquires through engagement with a particular social field' (2023, p. 67). This affective habitus is inextricable from the bodily habitus inculcated through bodily practices. As Shiloh Whitney writes on Merleau-Ponty, 'affect is ... the body schema's materialization of sensory

qualities and motor possibilities and vice versa' (Whitney, 2018, p. 492). Another way to think about this is body-knowledge: what the body 'knows' about itself and its feelings before the intervention of consciousness and language. Affect emphasizes a 'reciprocal materialization between body and world' to undo the opposition between internal proprioception and external circumstances, and so affects emerge *between* bodies 'like a force or a charge' not simply reducible to 'the sense that may be constituted through it' (Whitney, 2018, pp. 493, 494). When we run this back through Schaefer's argument that beliefs begin with these affects, we arrive at the sense that what we might mislabel as 'belief' or 'politics'—both of which sound entirely too rational—are in fact a product of one's bodily and affective conditioning.

EMBODIMENT: FEELINGS, FACIALITY, FASCISM

To think critically about how aesthetics primes bodies for fascism, I turn to the phenomenology of embodiment: how it *feels* to cultivate the bodily habits of Shōtōkan, particularly those elements which may well be the inculcation of fascist aesthetics.

Funakoshi Gichin and his son Funakoshi Gigo altered Tang-te/Shuri-te as they introduced it to mainland Japan into a fascist body-shaping enterprise. Like the rank belts, karate's famous *kata* seem innocuous and pragmatic, but in context, they may help cultivate that fascist aesthetic. They make it simple to learn whole sets of techniques, and they are not unique to Shōwa-era martial arts; on the other hand, Sontag (1975) emphasizes how 'the rendering of movement in grandiose and rigid patterns' lies at the core of all fascist aesthetics. These practices are part of cultivating a particular affective habitus. To think about the phenomenology (Telles 2022; see also Allen-Collinson, 2009 and Telles, Vaittinen, and Barreira, 2018) of fascism—how it feels, in one's body, to move through these patterns of being so acutely influenced by fascism—I turn again to what D. A. Farrer calls the 'somatic extension of participant observation where the body may become both subject and object of research' (Farrer, 2018, pp. 137, 138; see also Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, 2011, p. 7).

As I argue elsewhere, through merging academic knowledge and expert practice, martial arts studies can access what Csordas calls 'the experiential immediacy required by a cultural phenomenology grounded in embodiment is, as it were, closer to the surface and more apparently accessible to study' (Csordas, 1999, p. 148; Katz, 2024, p. 76). In that work, I suggested that martial arts can help us to think about the cultivation of virtue; here, I argue that it can also help us understand how fascism might also be constituted of 'actions of a mechanical, physical or physico-chemical order', or what Marcel Mauss calls 'techniques of the body' (1935/1973).

³ For an excellent summary of the field, see Donovan Schaefer's (2019) *The Evolution of Affect Theory*.



Figure 1. Funakoshi Gichin performs a movement from Heian Shodan



Figure 2. Funakoshi Gigo performs a similar movement

Mroz has argued that intentional, ritualised practice can reshape our relationship with our bodies so that our responses *feel* ‘externali[sed]’ and at times different to what might have once been ‘instinctual or preferred reactions’ (2020, p. 13). What does it mean when those new reactions are *fascist* reactions, or fascist ways of being? How can we resist when ‘incorporated gestures become automatic’ such that fascism becomes automatic (Da Nobrega et al, 2017, p. 61)?

And Shōtōkan karate-dō’s history demonstrates an explicit transition in bodily movement patterns toward a fascist aesthetic. Consider *kokutsu-dachi*, a stance unique to Shōtōkan karate-dō (generally replacing *neko hachi-dachi* in other Okinawan-based styles where kata overlap). In an image from 1925 (Figure 1), Funakoshi Gichin performs a movement from Heian Shodan (Pinan Nidan in many Okinawan styles) in *kokutsu-dachi*. In a second image from only a few years later (Figure 2), his son, Funakoshi Gigo, performs a similar movement. Funakoshi Gichin’s stance is much more similar to the Okinawan origins of the style: higher, with less tension and explicit visual indicators of strength. Phenomenologically speaking, to take Gigo’s stance *feels* powerful: the stance is deeper, with more rotational tension in the legs—and importantly, his face *looks* intense.

Faciality, in a Deleuzian sense, is the site where the territorializing, meaning-making, signifying regime of signs collides with the deterritorializing, post-signifying, subjectifying regime (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/2009). In other words, Gigo’s face is both a sign and not-a-sign: the communication of a meaning-making intensity, and the post-meaning expression of the body’s affects that have no direct meaning. As Jenny Edkins writes in *Face Politics*, the face ‘exists in a particular cultural, geographical, and historical context’ as a product of ‘a certain assemblage of power, a certain politics’ (2015, p. 9). This face says: look at the strength of this stance; look at this power, locked in stillness, but ready to explode.

Gigo’s face and *kokutsu-dachi* are the intersection of two Shōtōkan concepts: *kime* or the kind of snapping-stopping movement indicative of Shōtōkan, and a state of repose ready to erupt. In Shōtōkan, *kime* replaces the principle called *chinkuchi* or *kimochi* in Okinawan arts, which is more of a loose, whipping, release that does not *fix* (as in the meaning of *kime*) a body in space. In Shōtōkan, this becomes what we see in Gigo’s face and body: a tension at the end of a movement, where everything locks into place (many of the competitors in the World Karate Federation kata competitions demonstrate this to the utmost). At the same time, this locking emphasizes the sudden cessation of movement

in preparation for the next burst of motion: violence and repose, *kime* and *ansoku jōtai*.

Compared to his father's more relaxed stance and face, indicative of the pre-Manchurian Incident fascist repose, Gigo's stance feels like it is shoring up in preparation to erupt. These are aesthetic and phenomenological shifts that have nothing to do with martial efficacy. *Kime* feels strong; the tensing of the muscles and sharp exhalation sends biofeedback through the body that says: I am powerful. The clenched fists and taught tendons of Gigo's forearms say: I am still, but I will break from this stillness soon. This studied stillness, coupled with the rigid homogenization of this movement across bodies (the notion that 'this is *always* how the second movement of the kata should look'), is a self-annihilation that gives birth to the social. I stop moving so that I can explode into violence; I annihilate my bodily difference so that I can become the State, become *bushidō* or *karate-dō*.

And *becoming*, in a Deleuzian sense of embodied emergence, is where the stakes of my critique really lie. The ritual practice of self-defence cultivates the body as Becoming-State, Becoming-violent and Becoming-annihilated—a Becoming-fascism. Shōtōkan combines the distinctly Shōwa-fascist aesthetic of repose and strength with the ritualization and aestheticization of violence. Of course, there have always been martial rituals across cultures and histories, and simply having those rituals does not make a culture fascist. However, in combination with one another and with the violence-annihilation dyad, they become more dangerous. Traditional martial arts' self-defence rituals structure bodies in distinct ways which, while not necessarily fascist on their own, make bodies susceptible to the *dispositif* of fascism. Self-defence drills repeat metaphorized or aesthetic violence—practitioners mime outrageous actions like eye-gouges and stomping on downed enemies—until that violence becomes a part of their affective habitus. The self-defence paradox is that this Becoming-animal-violence is meant to defend against the animalistic barbarian at the gate of bourgeois society. When a non-martial artist strikes someone repeatedly, it is brutality; when the martial artist does so in ritually practiced, aesthetic and metaphoric movements, it is self-defence.

Paradoxical, wilful ignorance is the most insidious embodiment of fascism at the core of all of this, from Funakoshi Gigo's *kokutsu-dachi* to strip-mall karate-ka miming crushing someone's groin with their bare hands. The embodied ideologies of self-defence hinge on intentional ignorance about violence: it is at once barbaric and necessary to defend civilization; it is brutal and a source of repose; wildly animal and scientifically structured; effective 'on the street' and an aesthetic ritual. The self-defence practitioner must believe all of these paradoxes and ignore the paradoxes at their heart. And wilful ignorance about violence is *central* to the operation of fascism—both in the individual body and the State.

Crucially, that wilful ignorance is both ideological (racism, nationalism, etc.) and embodied. That is to say, the body must not-know its own embodied reflexes and limitations. The body

insists that it feels desire for purity when it in fact feels disgust for those deemed 'impure'; the body feels its power to harm, to kill, to self-defend even as it must not-feel its own limitations or weaknesses. The ideological paradoxes of self-defence and the barbarian become embodied paradoxes of self- and other-destructive violence.

CONCLUSION: RESISTANCE AND THE POLITICAL TASK OF MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

It feels easy to dismiss this entire paper as Foucauldian paranoia that sees fascist states behind every practice. None of my karate sensei have been Shōwa nationalists; many of them have been deeply caring, kind people. But Meiji Restoration martial arts became Shōwa martial arts became a way to train soldiers for massacres across China, Korea, the Philippines, and more, and to align a generation of bodies with an aesthetic way to kill and to die. Probably nobody has ever been killed by *kokutsu-dachi*, but certainly people were killed by bodies prepared to murder by the aesthetic of karate.

Here, perhaps, those scholars who enter martial arts studies' through the unique intersection of practitioner and academic can offer vague direction. In martial arts practice, perhaps a way to practice Shōtōkan karate (for example) without practicing fascism requires reevaluation of its aesthetics: maybe no rank belts, room for bodily difference in technique, careful consideration of the kinds of violence one imagines in *kata* and why. If ethics celebrates acknowledgement and what bodies can do, then perhaps we must imagine what karate would look like if it were celebratory and built on interpersonal partnership. Perhaps playfulness, like that of capoeira or some practices of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, might emphasize the sport- or game-elements of the martial arts over-against violence.

There are also some important caveats to be made. Shōwa fascism differs from Nazi fascism differs from neo-liberalism differs (?) from the emergent authoritarian nationalism in the United States. Similarly, the self-defence of American Kenpo, the inspiration for media personality Master Ken's 're-stomp the groin' self-defence techniques, differs from the highly stylised self-defence of Shōtōkan karate-dō. As a philosopher, I am fond of hair-splitting. But it is equally important, I think, to point out when affects overlap with politics that inflict violence (physical, emotional, social) on entire groups of bodies: after fourteen-year old Ahmed Mohamed was arrested in Texas for bringing a disassembled digital clock to school on the trumped up (a phrase I use intentionally) notion that it resembled a bomb, Master Ken released a video featuring a suitcase bomb from 'Inventions Ahmed Designs' at 'MIT—Muslim Institute of Technology' (Enter the Dojo Show, 2015). Looking meaningfully into the camera, Master Ken says there is 'no reason to be alarmed by something like that if it was designed by someone named "Ahmed"', leaning (incorrectly) on the *ḥ/kh* to emphasise its Otherness and Arabic

origin. And this is the problem: the affect of defending a self from a violent hooligan in the Victorian streets resonates with the feeling of repeatedly kneeling imagined thugs in a Kenpo class—and at the broader level where these feelings align with a *dispositif* that organizes bodies into barbarian and civilised, dangerous and ‘normal’, animal and human, martial arts should be wary of fascisms-plural creeping in.

As academics, martial arts scholars are uniquely well-positioned to confront the self-defence paradox and the self-destruction machine that turns bodies against themselves. In his lecture ‘Society Must be Defended,’ Foucault writes that ‘Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays.’ (1997/2003, p. 29). Intentional ignorance about violence, produced by the flows of the *dispositif* we call the State, turns back against itself as it inures bodies to violence. As Americans (to speak only of my own context) are fond of proving repeatedly, the ideology of neo-liberal self-defence directly, physically affects marginalised bodies—from Stand Your Ground laws to police violence to the rhetorical and real violence of the current administration. Confronting this real violence is an important task of justice. But it is also an important project of justice to detach the power of truth from this hegemonic violence, to confront the intentional ignorance at the heart of neo-liberal self-defence. If, as I have argued, the defence of the self as a paradoxical opposite of and extension of the State is intimately bound up in the feelings of fascism, then martial arts studies is central to resisting the insidious infection of fascism into everyday life.

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